

Playing with Feelings

Video Games and Affect

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Rhythms of Work and Play

Candies felt like something that everybody would have a positive feeling about. And I wanted something that could have shine and glossiness without being something unattainable.

—Sebastian Knutsson (cocreator of *Candy Crush Saga*),
“Hooked on Candy Crush,” Reuters, October 8, 2013

What is eating the zany? Why is she so desperate and stressed out? And why have so many found this mix of desperation and playfulness so aesthetically appealing?

—Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 2012

WHERE DO PLEASURE AND ITS OPPOSITE RESIDE in the colorful and fantastical management of our time? Why does it matter to our aesthetic experience (and I think it does) whether we are matching colorful candies or glittering jewels in a free-to-download mobile phone game? Sebastian Knutsson, cocreator of the massively popular game *Candy Crush Saga* (King, 2012), suggests that we have positive feelings toward candy because it is not an elite commodity. He may be correct. *Candy Crush Saga* has ninety-three million users and makes upward of one million dollars every day.¹ Wherever and whenever people are waiting for something else to happen, *Candy Crush Saga* and other casual games like it are being played: during commutes on buses and subways, in movie lines, in doctors’ waiting rooms. A 2012 article in the *New York Times Magazine* concluded that casual games are stupid and are taking over our lives: “Stupid games” the author pronounced, “are designed to push their way through the cracks of other occasions. We play them incidentally, ambivalently, compulsively, and almost accidentally. They’re less an activity in our day than a blank space in our day.”² This representation of casual games as all-consuming but also blank spaces neatly summarizes the way we seem

unable or unwilling to attach meaning to them and the time we devote to them. Our play, it seems, is both incidental and fundamental to daily life. Casual games seem too banal *and* too significant to analyze.

I began to think about casual games as a graduate student. While finishing my dissertation, I began structuring my writing time around little breaks and rewards. After I had produced a certain number of words, I allowed myself a brief interlude of nonwriting. Working alone at home in the dead of winter in western New York, I needed the modest rewards I granted myself, although now I find them a little embarrassing to recount here: checking Facebook, having a snack, and playing free casual games like *FarmVille* (Zynga, 2009) on my computer. I was trying to ward off anxiety and paralysis, and the shame and depression that went with them. But I was also trying to find some grace in my work. By constructing a careful balance between work and play, I hoped to find a productive rhythm for surviving the final stretch of graduate school and, more important, some lasting habits for sustaining pleasure in this peculiar type of labor I had chosen for myself.

Classic and contemporary theories of play speak to the balancing act, when we play, between order and chaos and between creativity and destruction.³ Similar rhythmic patterns are found in many casual games. For example, in *Candy Crush Saga* we work to sort candy by type to score points and progress through the levels. Like all tile-matching games, *Candy Crush Saga* offers pleasure derived from the simple mechanic of creating an orderly set of objects, which, once ordered, disappear, revealing a new disorderly scenario as the setting for the next round. A field of disorder is presented to the player, the player creates temporary order, and a new mess is then presented for ordering. Repeat. In *Plants vs. Zombies 2* (Electronic Arts, 2013) the logic of disorder/order is reversed. The player begins with a clean, empty grid that she fills with strategically positioned plants in neat rows, but then the zombies wreak havoc on the order created. Chaos ensues and, eventually, the player is presented with a clean slate to mess up all over again. Similarly, much of the labor of writing is about creating order from disorder (or sometimes the other way around), working through states of flow and interruption, and wondering if one's revisions are making things better or worse. This experience shaped my interest in casual games and their rhythms of work and play. The affective significance of the games' rhythms, however, came into focus later, when I became interested in affect theory. Understanding the games as rhythmic

interludes and then connecting this to the everyday affect that circulates around work, leisure, and the often difficult to articulate longing for a different relationship to work was my starting place for this book.

Casual games speak explicitly to labor and efficiency and to contemporary rhythms of work and play. The small games we play in between other tasks have particular rhythms and temporalities that are bound up with the blurring distinction between work and play in contemporary culture. Casual games offer players more than just work disguised as play; they also offer narratives and rhythms that sensually address the zany conditions of digital labor in the twenty-first century. About zaniness, Sianne Ngai writes, “Like a round of Frogger, Kaboom! or Pressure Cooker, early Atari 2600 video games in which avatars have to dodge oncoming cars, catch falling bombs, and meet incoming hamburger orders at increasing speeds, . . . zaniness is essentially the experience of an agent confronted by—and endangered by—too many things coming at her at once.”⁴ The word *casual* tends to downplay how zany many of these games are, as if they calm rather than amplify already intense feelings. Affect theory sheds light on a game genre that seems to exist as both ambient media for the individual and a mediating force between individuals and their working conditions and between individuals and their feelings about their labor. In this way, the rhythms of casual games—a quality that exceeds their narrative and mechanical processes—are experienced not simply as emotional states tied to individuals but also as part of the broader affective system that these games make evident and in which they participate. The next chapter considers the capacities of video games to wrest us from our everyday rhythms, to make our bodies move in ways that confound efficiency and productivity, a kind of radical arrhythmia. To get there, we first need to consider the more mundane experience of video games: the casual game as rhythmic interlude between other seemingly more significant activities. Rather than being blank spaces in our day, casual games are affective systems that mediate relations—and our feelings about these relations—between us and our devices, between workers and machines, and between images and code.

The first part of this chapter considers the structural similarities between mobile game applications and productivity apps. The mobility of casual games gives us access to the ways the laboring subject is increasingly tied to the capture, measurement, and commodification of affect. The second part of the chapter looks at the classic time management game

Diner Dash (PlayFirst, 2004) and its numerous sequels and imitators to reveal how these games address working women in particular, and how we can understand their appeal as part of a shared longing for a different relationship to labor in the twenty-first century. Games like *Diner Dash* put the player into an affectively charged relationship to both the working woman represented on the screen and the working body of the player, the work of hardware, and the actions of code. Thinking about casual games as affective systems expands the homologues among the actions of a player's body, the actions of a game's mechanics, and the actions of ideological signification. Affect gets at how casual games *work*—in the sense of the work of bodies, machines, and digital processes, but also in the sense of how these types of games work culturally and ideologically, and how they work on us and work us over in terms of impinging on our feelings, our identities, and our everyday lives.

Video Games and Labor

The industry classification of casual games encompasses several genres—online puzzle, word, and card games such as *Candy Crush Saga*, *Angry Birds*, and solitaire; simulation, time management, and social games such as *Words with Friends* and *FarmVille*; and less definable hits like *Kim Kardashian: Hollywood* and *Clash of Clans*. These very different games share some basic similarities: they have simple graphics and mechanics, they are usually browser or app based, and they are free or cost very little to play. Perhaps more than anything, casual games are designed to be played in short bursts of five to ten minutes and then set aside. With the advent of micro-purchases, often these games have built-in features that limit the amount of time a person can play in one sitting before being prompted to take a break or pay to continue playing. These games are designed to be interruptible because they are understood to be played in the context of work done while sitting in front of a computer or played on a mobile phone that might at any moment receive an e-mail, text, or call.⁵

The most common stereotype about casual games is that they are played during stolen moments, as breaks or distractions from the paid labor that players actually should be doing. As a genre, casual games bring to mind the bored office worker sitting in front of her computer with a game of solitaire always in progress in the background of her desktop, behind the windows of “real” work for which she is being paid. As such,

casual games are affectively charged as guilty pleasures. Some of the earliest games for personal computers, for example, came with a “boss key,” which, when activated, masked the current game on the screen behind fake spreadsheets designed to give the impression that work, rather than play, was being done on the computer. The relationship between casual games and the white-collar work environment is widely acknowledged by the game industry. A major industry study, for example, found that one-quarter of “white-collar” workers play video games at work.⁶ Given the stigma attached to this behavior, we can assume that the actual number is significantly higher than this self-reported survey indicates. Casual games, by their very definition, are bound up with the temporality of white- and pink-collar labor. Along these lines, Michel de Certeau’s example of *la perruque* offers us a way to think about playing casual games as a tactical response to conditions of labor. Literally meaning “wig,” *la perruque* is the worker’s own work disguised as work for his or her employer. De Certeau writes, “*La perruque* may be as simple as a secretary’s writing a love letter on ‘company time’ or as complex as a cabinetmaker’s ‘borrowing’ a lathe to make a piece of furniture for his living room.”⁷ Despite his problematically gendered example of the distinction between the simple and the complex, de Certeau understands both such practices as antagonistic to capitalism’s uses of workers, and as a strategy through which workers preserve a portion of their labor value for themselves. It is tempting to see casual games in this way—as separate from the work we do for our employers—but casual games are entirely embedded in work culture and rhythms.

Video games have always been an interface between work and play. At their origins, video games were part of the transformation of work in the postwar United States that was heralded by the importance of computers for the military-industrial complex. As discussed in previous chapters, both *Tennis for Two* and *Spacewar!* were created not as distractions from work but as playful means to visualize and make accessible the work of computers. These two games were designed as demonstrations for lab visitors, as ways to enable nonspecialists to see the processing labor of otherwise boring and inert machines.

There is a tendency in analyses of video games and labor to artificially separate the act of playing from the labor that produces the game and the device on which it is played. Play is figured as immaterial and an illusion that shields us from the knowledge of the material labor that went into producing the game itself. In this formulation, video game play is seen as a

form of leisure that gets co-opted by neoliberalism.⁸ This version of video game history suppresses just how central computer games were to the digital transformation of work from the 1960s onward. Despite the amount of energy that has gone into characterizing the creation of early computer games as countercultural hacking, the games were generally created as part of the broader labor of graduate students and research scientists affiliated with labs partially or wholly funded by national defense contracts.⁹ We can see early video games not just as ways to make the labor of computers visible, friendly, and accessible but also—at least in retrospect—as ways of demonstrating and justifying the work of federally funded researchers. As Fred Turner points out, the contemporary hacker/video-game-player-as-creative-worker is an ideal that emerged *from*, not against, the labor contexts of the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁰ This is part of the constellation of labor processes and contexts often called “immaterial labor,” which includes the reassertion of the subject and his or her communicative and affective qualities into the worker, self-management, increased precarity, and the universalization of affective labor. According to Maurizio Lazzarato, “What modern management techniques are looking for is for ‘the worker’s soul to become part of the factory.’”¹¹ Building on this, Michael Hardt writes, “Where the production of soul is concerned, . . . we should no longer look to the soil and organic development, nor to the factory and mechanical development, but rather to today’s dominant economic forms, that is, to production defined by a combination of cybernetics and affect.”¹²

Recently, with the gamification of education, work, public health, and other areas of everyday life once hostile to video games, the stereotype of casual games as distracting from productivity has receded. Whether played surreptitiously at work, as part of official job training, or on one’s “own time”—say, on the commute between work and home—casual games are intrinsically about the organization, rhythm, habits, and management of time devoted to labor. While “free” time (time spent off the employer’s clock) has never really been free, the degree to which our sociality, our bodies, our creativity, and our time are currently harnessed to digital networks that turn our play—rendered as quantifiable and valuable data—into productivity marks a different affective relationship to work and play. What is missing from the immaterial labor critique of video games as well as from arguments for gamification, then, is the crucial understanding of how video games, from the very beginning, were not separate from work but rather a platform for the reconceptualization of work that emerged

just as the context of labor in the West was also shifting from manufacturing to information and service industries.

Mobile phones, and their transformation from telephony devices to “smart” platforms for a variety of work and entertainment applications, are also rich sites for understanding the contemporary interrelationship of labor and leisure. Mobile phones are direct technological and ideological facilitators of the diffuse and flexible workforce and are significantly related to the endless workday and “24/7” productive time that began to emerge in the 1970s with ideas like “flextime” and “telecommuting.”¹³ Melissa Gregg describes the “tyranny of the mobile phone” in her account of the ways mobile digital devices raise expectations for perpetual productivity, regardless of where we are or what time it is.¹⁴ For example, marketers offer us productivity apps for our smartphones that will track and measure the time we spend doing various tasks. Similarly, there are services that measure our social media clout by using algorithms that analyze our activities in online social networks; our scores are then provided to potential employers interested in the value of our networked communication.¹⁵ Apps like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram encourage us to update our status, post content on the go, and participate in what Sarah Banet-Weiser critiques as the logic of self-branding.¹⁶ Finally, our digital labor is made visible and valuable through the large data mines to which we constantly contribute as we interact with mobile media. Mark Andrejevic observes, “Media and cultural studies, long engaged in the study of media audiences, have tended to focus on new manifestations of audience productivity rather than how these audiences are themselves *put to work* by these proliferating forms of audience monitoring.”¹⁷ In recent years, games for mobile devices have transformed the global video game industry and changed how we interact with our phones. Games are the most popular types of apps sold globally. Mobile game apps constitute 63 percent of iOS App Store revenue and 92 percent of the revenue for Google Play.¹⁸ The same devices that have played such a large role in restructuring the space and time of labor are now also often the first devices we consult for leisure activities. Making ourselves visible and making our labor visible in the network become one and the same.

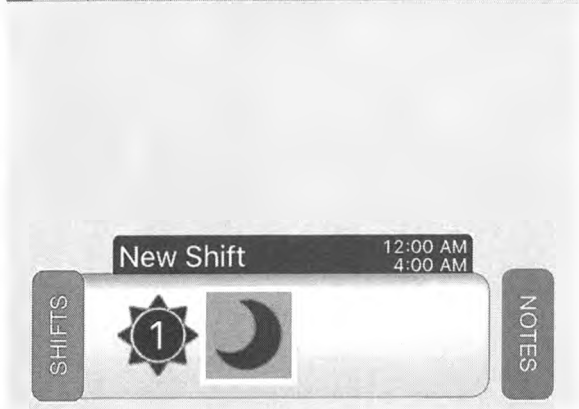
Through mobile phones, the measurement of productivity is outsourced onto the self. Our daily engagement with mobile media, especially games, is a particularly clear example of the productive harnessing of cybernetics and affect. With casual games, our leisure activities take on

the representations and rhythms of productivity. In many games, for example, grids organize the action on the screen. In *Plants vs. Zombies 2*, a tower defense game that pits the player's strategic gardening skills against the chaos caused by zombies, the playing grid is a checkerboard of alternating light and dark colors, referencing the game's chess roots. Likewise, in *Candy Crush Saga*, a tile-matching puzzle game set in a Candy Land-inspired world, the candy is displayed in neat rows, with each piece in its own square. The grid, of course, is also a familiar and ubiquitous interface for the organization and measurement of data in many productivity apps. For example, users of apps such as Shift Worker arrange colorful icons on the basic grid of a calendar to keep track of their changing work schedules. Other productivity apps, such as Procraster and Life Graphy, use grids, graphs, gauges, and colorful icons to track and display statistics like number of "productive minutes." Even the names of many productivity apps point to their organizational and self-management rhetoric: OmniFocus, 24me, Grid.¹⁹ In casual games, the grids on-screen are visual links to the rhythms and mechanics of the games' algorithmic structures.

Unlike most other mobile apps, games visually obscure our phones' measurement data and replace them with visualizations of measurement that are specific to gameplay. The various timers, meters, gauges, and score



The organizational grid in *Plants vs. Zombies 2*.



Like many productivity apps, Shift Worker, designed for organizing work schedules, features the grid of a calendar and colorful gamelike icons.

displays in mobile games mimic, compositionally and graphically, the displays on our phones that indicate various modes of connectivity to the network, time, date, and battery power. When we play games on our mobile phones, we seem to momentarily leave the realm of self-measurement and management of productive labor in order to play with and among heightened and fantastical versions of these very categories. In *Candy Crush Saga*, the phone's conventional symbols of connectivity—network

status, battery power, and time—are replaced with colorful gauges measuring the player's score, remaining moves, and boosters. In *Plants vs. Zombies 2*, the cartoonish interface measures daylight, plants available, coins earned, and zombies killed. In both games, these visualizations of game productivity are also accompanied by constant prompts to publicize one's accomplishments in the game through social media networks.

The contemporary state of the free-to-play mobile game industry illustrates both how the concrete labor of game production is profoundly alienated from the games' value and our consumption and, simultaneously, how the games that are produced reflect and refract these conditions in quite material ways. Games that cost nothing to download certainly obscure the labor that mined the columbite-tantalite, the assembly of phones under exploitative conditions, and even the labor of game design and coding. Yet labor shows up in the games' narratives, interfaces, mechanics, and algorithms. Through mobile game apps we are invited to engage with systems of measurement and evaluation that produce us not as concrete workers but rather as subjects of the mobile, liminal, and affective temporalities of labor in the twenty-first century. Given the incredible popularity of these games, we can assume that there is pleasure in the ways they register and mediate the liminal time and place of their play. While *Candy Crush Saga* and *Plants vs. Zombies 2* give us access to the curious temporalities of twenty-first-century work and play, they do not quite reveal the particular affective appeal of casual games. What we need to ask about casual games, then, is how do these types of games become aesthetic expressions of increasingly blurred temporalities?

Feeling Casual

Games like *Candy Crush Saga* and *Kim Kardashian: Hollywood* have become ubiquitous and astonishingly lucrative for their creators. Free-to-play, or "freemium," pricing strategies for games have proven to be extremely successful. This pricing model allows players to download games to their mobile devices for free, so they have little concern about whether or not they will like the games. Players may then choose to enhance their game experience by purchasing virtual goods throughout games that have been designed to be endless in order to maximize profitability. Recently, time management games have been folded into the industry classification



In *Candy Crush Saga* the various icons of gameplay measurement obscure the mobile phone's ordinary measurement icons.

of “invest/express” social networking games, where, Shira Chess argues, a “feminine leisure style” has spread across the casual games market. Invest/express games “count on the interstitial moments that we carry throughout the day, arguing that the player should use those moments deliberately as a mode of leisure.”²⁰ The fracturing of the genre “casual games” into the myriad names now used—time management, resource management, free-mium, invest/express, and others—emphasizes a kind of crass instrumentality. These games, according to the names we call them, are about both what we do in them and what they intend to do to us.

Casual games have become one of the most important global business and game design models in the industry, precisely because they reach players beyond the usual video game demographic of men between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five. Many of these players are women who do not play any other video games and would never identify as “gamers.” In North America, for example, casual games are the only type of video games for which women over the age of thirty-five have constituted the majority of the market for many years.²¹ The casual game market in India and East Asia has exploded in recent years as this affordable gaming model has met the needs of youth seeking games for their mobile devices. Casual games are appealing to an industry that appears to have saturated its traditional demographic. While the already massive budgets for producing mainstream console games continue to expand, the audience for those games has plateaued. Relatively cheap to produce, mobile casual games have the potential to tap into a much wider audience: all owners of smartphones.

While casual games are big business, our cultural understanding and assessment of them remain underdeveloped. Despite their rich and affectively complicated relationship to gender and contemporary labor, attaching meaning and significance to casual games can seem like a frivolous activity. This dismissive attitude is to some extent attributable to the kinds of feelings—guilt, stress, shame, and boredom—that circulate around these types of games and their association with procrastination. But, of course, casual games are also dismissed as culturally insignificant because they are so strongly associated with women.²² Although the popularity of these games has reduced some of the stigma associated with them over time, they are still held apart critically and formally from other types of video games. Even the term *casual game* itself performs this distinction, ascribing to other types of games, implicitly and by contrast, an aesthetic, narrative, and procedural formalism. With some notable exceptions, casual

games are often figured this way in both popular and academic accounts.²³ Theories of games that focus on the actions of code, algorithms, and hardware before narrative and representation are important and compelling developments in game studies. But they are also shaped by a rather narrow concept of what counts as a video game. Such theories seem like overkill when applied to games that require no devoted gaming systems and no honed gaming skills and that, as procedural objects, can appear quite repetitive and obvious. Like casual games, the field of game studies is meaningfully gendered. The divide between representation and computation in game studies mirrors other gendered binaries, such as nature/culture, emotion/logic, passive/active, and humanities/hard sciences, that make it difficult to ask of casual games the questions they demand. Casual games require us to analyze how computation, representation, and the context of play work together to convey cultural meaning.

In *Diner Dash*, the player leads the protagonist, Flo, through a series of increasingly hectic levels as she works as a harried waitress/restaurant owner, seating guests, taking orders, serving food, and clearing tables. One of the top-selling multiplatform downloadable games of all time, *Diner Dash* has spawned numerous sequels and inspired countless imitators, and in 2014 yet another version of the game was released for mobile devices. As such, *Diner Dash* is one of the defining titles of casual games and the time management subgenre. What exactly is the appeal of playing a game about a woman's desperate attempt to please her picky customers with an emphasis on timed tasks and the stressful feeling associated with the piling on of more and more work with each level? Or, to paraphrase this chapter's epigraph from Sianne Ngai, what is eating us, the casual game players, tapping at our screens on the subway? "Why have so many found this mix of desperation and playfulness [the zany] so aesthetically appealing?" Looking at *Diner Dash* we can see how the labor contexts of casual games are explicitly expressed in the narratives, mechanics, and rhythms of time management games. *Diner Dash* and games like it address *and potentially redress* the affective charges around the conditions of digital labor and leisure in the twenty-first century and their gendered dimensions. Rather than seeing these games as blank spaces between more significantly occupied time, we might think about how casual games provide an affectively charged rhythm for the contemporary blurring of work and play.

While it is true that not all casual games are explicitly gendered, and that player demographics are shifting across all game categories, it is also

true that the cultural meanings generated through and around casual games cannot be completely divorced from the genre's past and continued associations with women. The extent to which the genre of casual games is perceived as in need of being rescued from feminized mass culture or preserved as a site where women are actually playing video games is less important than the fact that game studies tends to dismiss the entire genre because these seemingly simple games do not fit neatly into an emerging field that privileges procedural complexity, expensive hardware, and graphic realism.

Game theorist and designer Ian Bogost offers a brief but useful discussion of casual games that illustrates the gendered dimensions of taste and distinction in game studies. Asking if there is such a thing as "kitsch" in the video game world, Bogost concludes that casual games fit this description. Using the work of the hugely popular yet critically derided painter Thomas Kinkade as an example, Bogost defines kitsch as "an art urging overt sentimentality, focused on the overt application of convention, without particular originality."²⁴ For Bogost, kitsch functions as a relationship between the aesthetics of sentimentalism and their display as markers of class location and aspirations of class mobility. *Diner Dash* is kitsch not because it deploys the "naturalistic sentimentalism" of a Kinkade painting but rather because it deploys "occupational sentimentalism" in its depiction of the virtue of hard work. In this way, Bogost sees *Diner Dash* as the equivalent of a motivational poster validating the Protestant work ethic hung in an office cubicle. You cannot hang a video game on a wall, Bogost notes, but casual games like *Diner Dash* are displayed all over the virtual walls of Facebook, publicly marking the players' progress and rewards. He writes, "By surrounding oneself with posters, or games, that espouse ideals of control, the timeworn hope of pure will breeds the wistfulness that makes kitsch appealing."²⁵ Bogost's dismissal of casual games as kitsch reproduces in game studies the familiar distinctions between "good" and "bad" objects premised on dubious and gendered notions of serious aesthetic value versus sentimentalism. This view of casual games can be understood as continuing the long tradition of dismissing as insignificant cultural forms that are coded as feminine.²⁶ By comparing casual games to motivational posters and aligning the form with "occupational sentimentalism," Bogost, perhaps unconsciously, points to precisely what is significant about casual games: they affectively appeal to our conditions of labor. Time management games stage the affective labor of being a worker (what

it feels like) as well as the work of being a subject who longs to feel differently in relation to work.

Flo(w) and Interruption

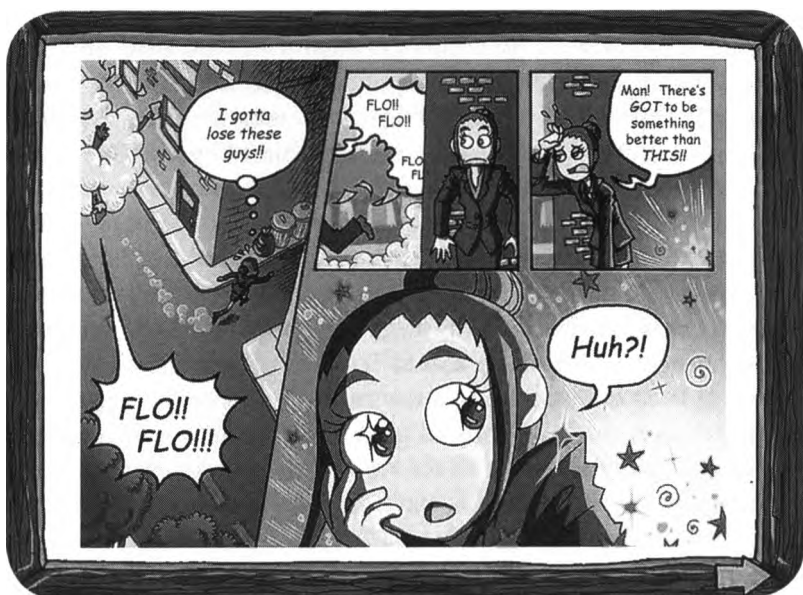
Diner Dash's introductory manga-style sequence begins with the text "Somewhere in a dreary office." We see Flo sitting at her desk quietly simmering as faceless coworkers shove more and more paperwork onto her desk. Erupting with frustration, Flo runs screaming past cubicles and out onto the street. Exhausted, panting, and leaning against a building, Flo exclaims, "Man! There's GOT to be something better than THIS!!" At this point she notices a run-down diner that is for sale and decides to quit her stressful office job and open her own restaurant.

Through *Diner Dash*'s opening sequence we can see how the narrative and tone represent the working woman and dissatisfaction with the "dreary office." The restaurant, although boarded up and shabby, is rendered in bright primary colors, while Flo's office is depicted in drab grays and browns. Owning a restaurant is figured as a literal escape from the grim cubicles and piles of paperwork. Flo's escape from the office mirrors our own presumed escape from a similar type of dreary work and into the colorful world of the game. The game reinforces this effect on a software level. When *Diner Dash* loads, it automatically takes over the screen, completely obscuring any nongame digital processes for which the device might be used. The entire screen becomes occupied by play. The game's images appear in order to hide our work from view.

Yet, although *Diner Dash* may set itself up as an escape from work, it is also at the same time clearly about working. After we click "Let's Play," the game leads us through a tutorial level where, as Flo, we learn the ropes of being a restaurant owner, which, in the perverse logic of the game, means learning how to be a waitress. The tutorial level also serves as an introduction to the mechanics of the game: the clicking, dragging, and clicking again to achieve the stated goals of quick, efficient, and friendly service. As customers arrive in the restaurant, we must click and drag to move them to tables. Then we must guide Flo through a series of actions, also achieved through simple clicks: taking the order, posting the order for the chef, serving the food, delivering the check, and clearing the dishes. Each successful action earns us points, and we earn bonus points by performing actions in a chain to increase efficiency. *Diner Dash*, like all



The opening of *Diner Dash* both represents and addresses a worker in a “dreary office.”



Diner Dash creates a parallel between Flo's escape from her stressful job and the player's presumed escape into the game.

time management games, structures our play through a series of simple repetitive actions that must be completed quickly over timed intervals. The pacing of the game increases and the tasks become more difficult as we progress. As Flo earns more money, she opens new restaurants, each one another step up from the diner.

Like *Diner Dash*, many time management games are explicitly aimed at the working woman and tap into a perceived shared longing for a better working life. Many of these games explicitly simulate occupations through their narratives and mechanics, and many feature working women as their main protagonists. The *Dash* series and its spin-offs include *Hotel Dash*, *Garden Dash*, *Cooking Dash*, *Wedding Dash*, *Dairy Dash*, *Diaper Dash*, *Pet Shop Hop*, *Dress Shop Hop*, *Teddy Factory*, *Betty's Beer Bar*, *Nanny Mania*, *Dr. Daisy Pet Vet*, *Magic Farm*, *Airport Mania*, *Sally's Spa*, *Ranch Rush*, *Hospital Hustle*, *Wendy's Wellness*, and even *Grave Mania* (in which the player takes the role of a zombie undertaker). As the titles indicate, the *Dash* games tend to focus on careers, activities, and interests that are coded as feminine. More often than not, these occupations are portrayed through white female protagonists. The narratives and graphics also tend to frame these occupations as “dream” jobs that the protagonists have come to after escaping less fulfilling jobs elsewhere. Perhaps more than anything, the titles of the *Dash* games speak to the games’ time management structures. Each of these games is organized around a mad rush, dash, hustle, or hop to complete repetitive tasks in a limited amount of time. However, as the titles also indicate, playing at these “dream” occupations is not entirely a sentimental endeavor—it is also a mania.

The name of *Diner Dash*’s protagonist also speaks to the perceived goals of time management games and to the flow of efficient labor that Flo (and the player) is meant to embody. In a smart analysis of the *Diner Dash* series, Shira Chess discusses the importance of the time management mechanics for the representation of work in the games. She argues that *Diner Dash* “at its core . . . is a conflation of work and play. . . . While the game is intended for play/leisure time, thematically it involves work spaces that bear a great deal of similarity to work in the non-game world.”²⁷ Chess understands this conflation of work and play as part of the appeal of time management games for women. Citing the work of Arlie Russell Hochschild on working women and time management, she points out that games like *Diner Dash* might appeal to women who already feel the pressure of juggling multiple “shifts” at work and at home.²⁸ Time management

games, according to Chess, are a kind of multitasking for the busy working woman in that they convert leisure time into time management training for their already overextended lives.²⁹

Casual game mechanics, narratives, and reward structures seem to speak to a desire for time-bound tasks with identifiable outcomes—things often perceived as missing from contemporary work. There is pleasure in the ways casual games encourage a smooth and efficient engagement with their algorithms. Game scholars often use Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's concept of "flow," a pleasurable state of absorption in a task, to discuss how video games balance challenges and rewards.³⁰ Similarly, Braxton Soderman writes: "Csikszentmihalyi envisioned a society that would put these principles to use. . . . When our tasks and activities become more like games, he argued, life itself becomes more pleasurable and also more productive."³¹ Soderman goes on to note that employers now look to video games for their models of pleasurable productivity. It is a mistake, however, to think that pleasure in these games (or any games) is derived solely from a feeling of flow. More often, the games are about a frenzied pace and play and/as interruption. What makes a game "casual" is that it functions in the ambiguous times and spaces between the myriad tasks we do on digital devices: between work and domestic obligations, between solitary play and social gaming, and between attention and distraction.

There is a disjuncture between Bogost's description of casual games as kitsch and the analyses offered by Chess and Soderman. Bogost, who is concerned with how the games look, finds sentimentalism about work. Chess and Soderman, who focus on mechanics and the player, find pleasure and social realism in casual games' address to the laboring body. The focus on aesthetics does not address the ways the games' colorful imagery is repeatedly undone by their time management mechanics. And the focus on game mechanics does not get at the odd interplay between the grimly repetitive actions and the cheerful tone. Of course, at the level of image and narrative, there is nothing realistic about the *Diner Dash* games. Beyond the simplistic narratives, the cartoonish graphics, and the uniform whiteness of their protagonists, the games condense the complexity of running a business down to one or two actions. Except for the brief appearance of the chef in the background, we never see Flo's staff. From seating guests to busing tables, the heroic and overworked Flo appears to do it all herself. Knowing this, we can hazard a guess that players are not attracted to these

games because they offer realistic representations of their working lives or because they provide simple, sentimental escape. Instead we might think about how the apparent disjuncture between the images and the mechanics is precisely where meaning *and pleasure in that meaning* are produced.

Time management games are also sometimes referred to as “click management” games, connecting the player’s manipulation of the interface (clicking a mouse or tapping a touchscreen) with the goals of the game. The player clicks or taps on various tasks to complete them, always juggling multiple tasks and making decisions about order and rhythm in order to complete the tasks effectively. Video game genres are often classified by game mechanics (e.g., first-person shooters, platform games, racing, fighting). As Jesper Juul puts it, game genres are named “after what you *do* as a player, rather than after the fiction.”³² This shores up claims in game studies that game mechanics are more significant to the player’s experience than any of the more obvious signifying units. What casual games make clear, however, is that game mechanics, which are themselves kinds of fictions, are intimately tied to the representational practices of games. The actions in a game—what we do—and how we feel about them are shaped by the game’s representational fictions, and the actions are themselves signifying practices that create meaning. What can seem like a discontinuity between the banal activity of clicking or tapping on the screen of a digital device and the nightmarish representation of increasingly difficult and endless work is actually a transformation of our relationship to the digital device. The usual search and selection functions associated with the physical act of touching a touchscreen or maneuvering a mouse are replaced with the abstract although quite material repetitive labor of clicking or tapping. The supposedly labor-saving digital device, and the way we feel it and feel about it, is momentarily transformed through play. The rhythmic tapping and clicking we do to complete a timed task is a highly visceral and visible form of work on a smooth machine that is designed to conceal our labor. In this way, our actions in the game make the time and work of the digital device newly legible in ways that reflect how these same aspects of our everyday digital experiences are often submerged beneath the rhetoric of ease, efficiency, and flow. In time management games, where work is both the subject and the presumed context of play, our physical relationship to the machines of our labor is momentarily transformed through this imbrication of narrative and mechanics. Indeed, we experience video games

as digital procedures, but our very access to their procedural expression is necessarily couched in and framed by the visual, aural, and narrative dimensions of the games. The opposite is also true. Our experience of a game's representations is always informed by the invisible digital procedures the game asks our bodies to make visible.

The obvious fictions of time management games are about the particular occupations they represent. We play as restaurateur, waitress, farmer, real estate agent, or zombie undertaker, but the actual experience of labor in these games is absurdly easy. The act of harvesting a crop or working an eight-hour shift on our feet is reduced to a series of taps of the touch-screen or clicks of the mouse. On the levels of representation and mechanics, games like those in the *Dash* series can seem like fantasy work spaces. These games portray women as entrepreneurs who are successful because they love the work they do. Their tasks are clearly defined and always rewarded. Their work environments are safe, colorful, and full of zany characters. But the experience of actual labor in the games bears more resemblance to grim Taylorization than to occupational sentimentalism. In these games, the more work we do and the more efficiently we do it, the more complicated, sped up, and vast our tasks become. The games' relative easiness compared to "real" work or hard-core games is deceptive. This is the dash, hop, or mania to which so many of the titles refer. Thus, these games' appeal to players cannot be reduced to a simple notion of pleasure in easy tasks and the satisfaction of achievable goals. At the narrative, mechanical, and procedural levels, *Diner Dash* simultaneously represents a laboring woman, asks the player to perform efficiently on a digital device, and addresses a playing subject who is presumed to desire an escape from the dreary conditions of work.

Casual games' particular combination of flow and interruptibility speaks to the way work on computers and other digital devices is often done. Describing the conditions of digital work, Cathy Davidson writes: "Workflow in the digital age is a constant unsorted bombardment that defies old divisions of labor. We receive urgent memos at a rate never imagined before. . . . And we receive those on the same computer that delivers us banana bread recipes from Aunt Bessie and 'lolcats.'"³³

Zaniness, Ngai writes, "calls up the character of a worker whose particularity lies paradoxically in the increasingly dedifferentiated nature of his or her labor."³⁴ Citing the work of Nikolas Rose on neoliberal conditions of labor, she continues:

Post-Fordist zaniness in particular suggests that simply being a “productive” worker under prevailing conditions—the concomitant casualization and intensification of labor, the creeping extension of the working day, the steady decline in real wages—is to put oneself into an exhausting and precarious situation. This can be all the more so in postmodern workplaces where productivity, efficiency, and contentment are increasingly measured less in terms of “objective exigencies and characteristics of the labor process (levels of light, hours of work, and so forth)” than as a factor of “subjective attitudes” about work on the part of workers.³⁵

The timing, rhythm, and tone of casual games, from *Candy Crush Saga* to *Diner Dash*, interrupt our workflow in precisely the way that interruptibility, fragmentation, and piecework have come to be the common conditions of labor in the digital age. On our computers we move from one window to another, negotiating the different languages, rules, and logics of the different software programs we are using. The digital landscape is not only about the easy flow of seamless touch navigation and information at our fingertips but also about constant procedural and ergonomic shifts between windows, programs, devices, interfaces, and lexicons. The everyday experience of digital media is as much an experience of pauses, breaks, ruptures, and glitches as it is an experience of flow.³⁶ The digital worker is constantly asked to move from one task to another, to juggle multiple and varied tasks simultaneously, *and to feel good about this* as some sort of improvement over constant focus. Casual games function both as rhythmic interludes between various activities and as emotional mediators bridging the gaps, pauses, and glitches that are part of our everyday digital work lives.

In light of this, casual games can be productively linked to other types of mass media geared toward women. In her 1970s study of television soap operas and women viewers, for example, Tania Modleski argues that the conditions of reception for soap operas correlate with the rhythms of women’s work in the home. She observes that soap operas’ highly fragmented, repetitive, and drawn-out narrative structure, as well as the commercial interruptions and the flow between soaps and other daytime programming units, “reinforces the very principle of interruptibility crucial to the proper functioning of women in the home.”³⁷ Similarly, we might think of casual games as punctuating and providing a rhythm and timing

to work—whether in the home, at a workplace, or during the commute between these spaces—mediating shifts between different kinds of tasks, different emotional tones, and different people, as well as between attention and inattention. Since Modleski conducted her study, television soap operas have all but disappeared and video games have become a dominant form of mass media. Casual games are filling in for and significantly revising at least one of the cultural functions once performed by the daytime soap. The interruptibility of casual games, their relative simplicity and short levels, offers the player a type of pleasure that speaks to the way her work time is already structured. The experience of rhythm and flow within the games' fictions and mechanics speaks to the desire for a smoother path across the multiple shifts of the day and even across the troubled contemporary work landscape.

Just as *Diner Dash* clearly acknowledges the perversity of the conflict between its cheerful visual fantasy and its grim mechanics, so we might also acknowledge the possibility that the pleasure found in casual games is not based on any simple notion of escape or distraction, or, on the other hand, of social realism. The zaniness of time management games—a quality that lies in their rhythm and aesthetics—is represented by and also exceeds their narrative and mechanical processes. It is felt not simply as an emotion tied to subjects or digital objects but rather as inexorably bound up with larger forces of affective labor and precarity in the twenty-first century. Casual games are the ideal medium for the casualization of labor. Time management games do not simply offer a representation of work, they also offer digital procedures that impinge on, skew, and intensify feelings about work. Through the interplay of their digital procedures, representational practices, and gameplay actions, these games offer a rhythm that addresses a desire for flow in a digital landscape that is defined more by distraction and interruption. Paying attention to how casual games manage flow and interruption across their narratives, mechanics, and presumed contexts of play reveals how they figure as meaningful and affective interludes in contemporary life.

Feeling Zany

In Marxist theory, affective labor is the labor under capitalism that produces and manages feelings—service with a smile, caring for the sick, the products of the entertainment industry. Feminist analyses of affective

labor have connected this to undervalued “women’s work” in the family and in service industries, such as caring for children and spouses or working as a flight attendant. In both Marxist and feminist analyses, affective labor functions on the level of the subject as the producer and manager of feelings that smooth over the otherwise brutal and alienating conditions of capitalist labor. Chess links the emotional representations in *Diner Dash* to the ways women are called upon to do emotional labor in the workplace and at home: “If the *Dash* games construct a complicated relationship between work and play—then the games, too, have the potential to become a form of emotional labor. . . . And just as emotional labor takes a toll on many women, so might emotional play.”³⁸ We can see affective labor at work in most time management games, from their predominant focus on service-based occupations to how the player’s progress is measured and visualized through feeling-based icons. In *Diner Dash*, for example, customers are pictured with series of red hearts to indicate their moods based on the service they are receiving from Flo. Additionally, affective labor can be seen more broadly across the emotional appeals of other types of casual games. If we fail to complete a level in *Candy Crush Saga*, Tiffi, the young girl who guides us through the candy world, is shown crying, with an icon of a broken heart above her. The representation of emotional labor in casual games is only a trace of the affective processes that get called up into representation. These games mediate affective processes that cannot be pinned to a single subject or representational practice, however, and this potentially opens up a space for interpreting the emotional and relational functions of these games beyond a grim assessment of their toll on players.

While casual games are a continuation of mobile media’s metrics of labor, they also skew these systems of quantification through their sped-up, exaggerated, and preposterous tasks. Ngai wonders why the strenuous and laborious performances of zany characters in visual culture make us laugh. Her analysis centers on the zany performance of Lucille Ball as Lucy Ricardo in the iconic 1950s American television series *I Love Lucy*. She asks, “What type of aesthetic subject, with what capacities for feeling, knowing, and acting, does this ludic yet noticeably stressful style address?”³⁹ In the postwar reconsolidation of gendered labor, Ngai argues, we can understand Ball’s brand of humor, her hyperactive and usually failed labor performances, as speaking to women viewers increasingly aware of their own affective labor performances in a variety of paid and unpaid workplaces inside and outside the home.

In *Candy Crush Saga*, Tiffi cries and a heart breaks when we fail to complete a level.



Relatedly, consider the ending of the original *Diner Dash* game. After Flo has completed all the tasks to become the head of a restaurant empire, she is transported above the clouds, where a Hindu goddess challenges her to ten waitressing trials inside one of her own restaurants. To enable Flo to complete the trials, the goddess endows her with two additional arms, allowing her to carry twice the amount she could before. *Diner Dash*'s ending is a gentle critique of its own "endless work" procedural rhetoric. Ngai writes that zaniness "is really an aesthetic about work—and about a precariousness created specifically by the capitalist organization of work. More specifically . . . zaniness speaks to a politically ambiguous

erosion of the distinction between playing and working.”⁴⁰ After Flo has worked her way up and has built a restaurant empire, her reward is extra appendages with which to more efficiently serve. In this way, the game begins by creating an affective relation between player and game based on reward for the completion of small, simple tasks, but as it develops, this affective relationship is transformed by the game’s operational logic that, in order to proceed, the player must, in Lucy Ricardo fashion, take on more and more tasks and accomplish them faster and faster.

Recalling the *I Love Lucy* episode in which Lucy and Ethel desperately try to keep up with a candy factory assembly line, *Candy Crush Saga*, *Plants vs. Zombies 2*, and *Diner Dash* offer players pleasure but also pathos, derived from the predicament of having their sense of control and mastery tested by ever more difficult tasks, increased targets, and more limiting constraints. In *Plants vs. Zombies 2*, the major constraint is time. In fact, the game’s subtitle is “It’s About Time”—a humorous reference to both the game’s time travel narrative and how long fans of the game’s first installment had to wait for the second. “It’s about time” is also an accurate description of what the game’s graphics, algorithms, and mechanics measure, visualize, and make manifestly felt by the player: time and its passing. The game’s humor resides in the premise of a high-stakes battle between two entities not known for their speed: zombies and plants. The tension lies in the slowness of the zombies’ trajectory toward the player’s house and how long seeds take to regenerate before the player can plant them again. As the player progresses through the levels, the waves of zombies and their strength increase, making her job more difficult. For added pressure, the player can tap the fast-forward button to speed up the entire game. *Candy Crush Saga* has a more leisurely relationship to time. The constraint of most levels is the number of moves, not the amount of time, the player has to complete the goal. Yet just as the player gets comfortable with this rhythm, the game presents a timed level. This shift has a visceral effect. The player’s heart rate increases as she speeds up her gestures, struggling to adapt to this new constraint and meet the goal set by the game. Just as Lucy and Ethel become zanier in their behavior as the speed of the candy factory conveyor belt picks up, these games and the player’s activities within them become zanier and more stressful as they progress. Almost all video games follow this same trajectory, from easy to more difficult as the player invests more time, but in casual games this convention combines

with representations, player demographics, and context of use to form an affective system that speaks to the conditions of modern labor and to an unarticulated longing for something different.

The humor of zaniness, Ngai argues, is linked to notions of the laboring subject, who, contrary to Henri Bergson's inflexible subject, becomes preposterously flexible and adaptable under the demands of capitalism. Along these lines, one could argue that casual games—their interfaces, aesthetics, and mechanics—are purely about creating similarly flexible and adaptable subjects. The zaniness of casual games can seem at first glance like utter commitment to productivity; however, as Ngai points out, zaniness—in all its desperate and frenzied action—is also fundamentally unproductive, even destructive. We laugh as, facing the prospect of being fired from their jobs if they let a single piece of candy go by without being wrapped, Lucy and Ethel stuff candy into their mouths and down the fronts of their aprons in an attempt to hide their failure. The destruction of the commodity for the sake of preserving the social relations of labor is another way of describing the zany aesthetic. While playing casual games is always connected to the means and modes of productivity, it would be foolish not to recognize that it is also about taking some time, even if very brief, away from concrete labor and using our machines toward different ends.

The Interlude

The interstitial qualities of casual games—that they are played in in-between times and spaces and that they constitute affective pathways between ourselves and others—are central to their cultural meanings and functions. Brian Massumi describes affect as a kind of intensity that momentarily interrupts the narrativizing linear processes of subjective perception: “It is like a temporal sink, a hole in time, as we conceive of it and narrativize it. It is not exactly passivity, because it is filled with motion, vibratory motion, resonation. And it is not yet activity, because the motion is not of the kind that can be directed (if only symbolically) toward practical ends in a world of constituted objects and aims (if only on screen).”⁴¹ While affect works in the spaces between representation and computation, between the representation of work and the experience of labor in the games, and between the player and the device, it is not as fugitive a process as Massumi describes. Affect lands—as image, as algorithm,

as interface—and becomes present and readable to us as feeling, mood, and emotion. If time management games are zany according to Ngai's formulation, they are also sentimental in that they speak to a longing for a different, less fraught, relationship to labor. This inarticulable yet felt longing for a different relationship to work is the space of possibility that affect theory pries open in a consideration of casual games.

As discussed in the Introduction to this book, I understand the rhythmic interludes of casual games as being explicitly related to Raymond Williams's "structure of feeling." It is difficult to classify and explain these moments (the woman playing *Candy Crush Saga* on the way to work, the graduate student harvesting a few crops in *FarmVille* before returning to her dissertation) because they appear to fall outside the institutions that give value and meaning to our lives. They seem insignificant, or even shameful, in their banality. Yet these moments and the feelings they evoke are perhaps the best signs we have of where desire and longing begin to intersect with a call for new social relations. How might a casual game serve as an affective system between the player and a wider community of players?

The "click" or "tap" is both a break and a connection. Clicking on a link on a website or tapping on Flo in *Diner Dash* causes a rupture between the present state of the digital procedure and its next state. Our clicks punctuate the flow of code, inputting new data to close down one field of action and begin another. But, like punctuation, clicks also create an expressive relationship across modes (work/play), spaces (the place of work/elsewhere), and bodies (the player's body/the computer's body and the wider community of players). Since the emergence of the online social network Facebook, the platform has been used as a means to add a social dimension to casual gaming. The rhythm of clicks in a casual game is extended beyond the game itself into the social network. The player's clicking on images, status updates, and friends' wall posts *about* the game *mirrors* the performativity of clicking in the game. Furthermore, when the game uses Facebook to request action in the game—say, encouraging players to trade items with their friends—the player's click resonates across several social and media registers. It actually performs actions in the game, but it also performs a linking action between the player and friends. It is a trivial link, perhaps, but in light of the larger affective processes that circulate around casual games, it opens the player (and the game) up to wider fields of action.

When a casual game is played as part of a social network, the game application uses the network to link players through their shared investment

in the game. Through wall posts, the game application encourages players in the same network to buy, share, or swap game items or to set up restaurants, farms, dress shops, and so on adjacent to each other. Game-related wall postings on Facebook are also means to advertise players' progress in the game and to generate competition between players. In the overlap between the affective processes, proceduralism, and representational practices of casual games and those of Facebook, we can begin to see how casual games can create a form of relation between individual players and a wider community of players.

Like all social games on Facebook, *Diner Dash* uses postings on players' walls to encourage regular play. Once a player agrees to allow the game app access to her profile, *Diner Dash* publicly posts nearly constant updates about the player's progress in the game, also posting on her friends' walls to enlist their support. In this way, the game uses Facebook's tool of the wall post both to keep the player engaged with the game, even during times when she is not actively playing it, and to deepen the player's affective investment in the social network. In addition to the ways the game communicates with individual players through wall posts, *Diner Dash*'s application page uses the Facebook status update function to communicate broadly with the game's users, addressing them as part of a wider community of players.

Shortly after the March 2011 earthquake, subsequent tsunami, and nuclear disaster in Japan, many popular online games, including *Diner Dash* and *FarmVille*, and their players used Facebook as a platform through which to express concern for those affected and to raise money for assistance. For example, a status update on *Diner Dash*'s Facebook page stated, "From everyone here at PlayFirst and Diner Dash, our hearts [are] with all those affected by the Japanese earthquake and tsunami."⁴² With the promise that profits would be donated to relief efforts, several popular games encouraged players to buy in-game items, such as a pagoda bridge, an "Earthquake Relief Lettuce" crop, or a daikon radish crop. These sentiments and appeals to charitable gameplay were met with more displays of sentiment (mostly positive) by players using Facebook's "like" button, emoticons of hearts and happy faces, and words of support in their comments.

It is fair to take a critical view of the games' mobilization and expression of concern for the victims of the disasters in Japan. Rather than seeing these actions simply as an example of corporations disingenuously

using disaster to increase their bottom lines, however, we might also view them as a completely understandable, even expected, outcome of casual games as affective processes that participate in the commodification of affect that is characteristic of twenty-first-century capitalism. The not-quite-articulated longing for different work and a different relationship to labor can be easily captured in the Facebook conventions of “liking” things, sending hearts and happy faces, sharing links, and otherwise signaling the sentiment of global goodwill through digital commodities. The circulation of sentiment we see in this example illustrates how affect gets converted into the displays of feeling that, as Lauren Berlant asserts, are characteristic of the intimate public sphere.⁴³ As Berlant points out, the intimate public sphere is practiced and expanded through commodities. Casual games are part of the larger affective economy of the intimate public sphere. Rather than dismissing casual games as kitsch, stupid, or blank spaces in our daily lives, we might view them as important contemporary sites of “the unfinished business of sentimentality in American culture.”⁴⁴ Looking at mass-mediated women’s culture mostly in the form of mid-twentieth-century film and literature, Berlant identifies the “female complaint” genre, noting that films and books in this genre “foreground witnessing and explaining women’s disappointment in the tenuous relation of romantic fantasy to lived intimacy.”⁴⁵ She continues:

Over more than a century and a half of publication and circulation, the motivating engine of this scene has been the aesthetically expressed desire to be *somebody* in a world where the default is being nobody or, worse, being presumptively *all wrong*: the intimate public legitimates qualities, ways of being, and entire lives that have otherwise been deemed puny or discarded. It creates *situations* where those qualities can appear as lurkinous.⁴⁶

The casual games I have discussed can be productively added to the female complaint genre, although here the complaint expresses not only women’s disappointment over lived intimacy but also a whole range of disappointments, not the least of which is the way work culture and labor conditions in the twenty-first century seem to exacerbate gender inequality while at the same time universalizing women’s precarious status as workers to massive segments of the population, regardless of gender. Casual games open

up the possibility of affective relations that call into question the myths and failures of the digital workplace, the constantly increasing bleed of work into our private lives, and the role of emotional labor in the twenty-first century.

Conclusion

Casual games function in the times and spaces between the myriad tasks we perform on digital devices: between domestic tasks and social obligations, and between solitary private activities and public/private social networks. Through mobile game apps we can see how the blurred distinction between labor time and leisure time is both concretely and abstractly productive. Globally popular mobile game apps like *Candy Crush Saga*, *Plants vs. Zombies 2*, and *Diner Dash* remediate the measurement aesthetics and mechanics of self-managed labor. At the same time, their zany narratives and game structures leave room for the pleasure of play. When we open a casual game, we open up an affective process, and regarding casual games in this way allows us to see the relationship between their more visible representational practices and their less visible digital procedures. Casual games are also meaningfully gendered, and this is important to keep in mind as we examine how the discourse around these games has been shaped. *Affect* is not a neutral term; rather, it is always culturally situated in relation to the gendering of the bodies and objects of mass-media culture.

Conceptualizing casual games as affective processes stresses the relationship between games as cybernetic systems and their role in larger interrelational systems of representation, labor, identity, play, and so on. This is an approach to culture, like Williams's, that recognizes how much of the sense we make of the world and our actions in it is not entirely caught up in or articulated by clear-cut ideologies or institutions, or by overt resistance. Affect speaks to the spaces, forces, and moments that fall outside the discursive boundary lines of work, home, and social life—say, the moments in the commute between work and home, when we tap our mobile phone screens, playing games to pass the time. These spaces and moments and what they constitute are hard to articulate or theorize, and yet they form the closest thing we know to “everyday life” and a vernacular digital culture. The way casual games both represent the working woman and connote an activity done in order to escape work compels us to understand them as more culturally significant than they are usually made

out to be. Rather than being equivalent to motivational posters—static media that simply adorn and reinforce the status quo of class, gender, and labor conditions—casual games are affective processes with the potential to animate changes in these same conditions. This is not to say that casual games constitute an inherently radical or even progressive media form, but it is to say that they participate in a structure of feeling that is different from that of other types of video games, other media forms, and other digital processes with which we engage.

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3. Rhythms of Work and Play

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23. Among the notable exceptions are Jesper Juul, John Vanderhoef, and Mia Consalvo, "Using Your Friends 2.0: Social Mechanics in Social Games," in *FDG 2011: Proceedings of the 6th International Conference on Foundations of Digital Games* (New York: ACM, 2011), 188–95; Shira Chess, "Going with the Flo: Diner Dash and Feminism," *Feminist Media Studies* 12, no. 1 (2012): 83–99.
24. Ian Bogost, *How to Do Things with Videogames* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 83.
25. *Ibid.*, 87.
26. Andreas Huyssen lays out this history well in *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 44–64.
27. Chess, "Going with the Flo," 90.
28. *Ibid.*; Chess cites Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Time Bind* (New York: Holt, 2001).
29. Chess, "Going with the Flo," 91–92.
30. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety: Experiencing Flow in Work and Play* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1975). For a recent example of the

application of Csikszentmihalyi's theory to video games, see Katherine Isbister, *How Games Move Us: Emotion by Design* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2016).

31. Braxton Soderman, "Intrinsic Motivation: Flow, Video Games, and Participatory Culture," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 2 (March 2009): para. 3.4, <http://journal.transformativeworks.org>.

32. Juul, *A Casual Revolution*, 68.

33. Cathy Davidson, "So Last Century," *Times Higher Education*, April 28, 2011, <https://www.timeshighereducation.com>.

34. Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 9.

35. Ibid., 10, emphasis added; Ngai cites Nikolas Rose, *Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self* (London: Free Association Books, 1999), 70–71.

36. It is tempting to say that this rhythm of pauses and breaks is found primarily in what used to be called "white-collar" labor. But between the labor shifts that have made once-stable white-collar jobs more precarious, the sheer variety of work that involves sitting in front of a computer, and the ubiquity of mobile phones with games on them, the rhythm I am talking about here extends beyond the narrow category of white-collar office worker. Games are in all kinds of workplaces, from a call center in Mumbai to a nurses' break room in Toronto to a stockbroker's office in Manhattan.

37. Tania Modleski, "Rhythms of Reception: Daytime Television and Women's Work," in *Regarding Television: Critical Approaches*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (Los Angeles: University Publications of America, 1983), 71–74.

38. Chess, "Going with the Flo," 96; Chess cites Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

39. Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 8.

40. Ibid., 188.

41. Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 26.

42. Diner Dash Facebook page, "Status Update," March 11, 2011, 5:21 p.m.

43. See Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008); Lauren Berlant, *Intimacy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997).

44. Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, 2.

45. Ibid., 1–2.

46. Ibid., 3.

4. Games to Fail With

1. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 6.

2. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011), 4.